Chapter 4

Transécriture and Narrative Mediatics

The Stakes of Intermediality

André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion

Adaptation, medially, and intermedially: these are the issues engaged in our text. Our original aim was to demonstrate that, in moving from one medium to another, the “subject” of a story – we will return to the issue of what we mean by “subject” – would necessarily undergo a series of informing and deforming constraints linked to what might be called the new medium’s intrinsic configuration, since each subject would be presumably endowed with its own configuration. This configuration, in our original conception, would be always already more or less compatible with a particular medium and would thus preprogram, as it were, any process of adaptation. Beginning from these early intuitions, we decided to develop a deeper reflection concerning adaptation, rewriting, transécriture, and trans-semioticization. The first question we confronted is at the very kernel of the whole problematic: is it possible for the story (fabula) to exist outside any and all media? Or, to put it differently, is it possible to imagine a story in a kind of original virgin state, prior to any mediatic incarnation?

The Means of Expression as the Occasion for a Physical Encounter

We can begin our investigation by looking at the issue of expressive production and creation. When the artistic “subject,” and here we use “subject” in a different sense, in the sense of the expressive artist, when this “subject” decides to express him or herself, he or she is always confronted by a kind of resistance specific to the chosen medium of expression. Human thought, as it “materializes” itself, always undergoes an encounter
with the world of contingency. There is no incarnation that does not brush up against the flesh that actualizes the very process of incarnation. In one of his novels, Paul Auster describes the uncertain writerly materialization of the thoughts of his narrator:

When I first started, I thought it would come spontaneously, in a trance-like outpouring. So great was my need to write that I thought the story would be written by itself... No sooner have I thought one thing than it evokes another thing, and then another thing, until there is an accumulation of detail so dense that I feel I am going to suffocate. Never before have I been so aware of the rift between thinking and writing. For the past few days, in fact, I have begun to feel that the story I am trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language, that the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important.1

Here Auster evokes the resistance of the expressive material in relation to the artist’s desire to inscribe in that material whatever ideas come into the artist’s mind. The thoughts of the narrator — since we are dealing here with a novelistic representation — will remain incommunicable, merely playing with their own opacity, if they were not incarnated in a given expressive form, in this case writing. But perhaps it is also true that the said form — that is, literature — is inadequate to the project envisioned by the narrator. But could it not be that the inadequacy attributed to the incarnational resistance of thought itself as a floating aura, might in the end be nothing more than a refusal of cooperation on the part of the material of expression? One might go even further and see the issue from a more positive angle: perhaps all these vague ideals which throw themselves endlessly against the breakwater of scriptural language are mistaken in persisting in this direction. Might they not find a better semiotic incarnation in another medium, in music for example?

We can also note that if these thoughts escape the narrator, it is also because those thoughts have hardly yet been formulated. That idea obviously evokes the question of the possibility of the existence of thought “before” or “beyond” (depending on one’s point of view) prior to its formulation. Can thought exist without being always already formulated, that is to say, mediated, if only for oneself alone, inside one’s head? This question is a momentous one, touching on such diverse fields as epistemology, philosophy, and ethics, and we will return to it later, but for the moment our project is more modest. We would like to establish the propositional foundations for what we would call a narrative mediatics, a project “nourished,” as it were, by transdisciplinary intuitions.2

Within this train of thought, and along the same lines as suggested by the Auster text cited above, is the notion that all expression is first of all an encounter with opacity. In order to become transparent, communication has to be measured against the fundamental opacity inherent in any material of expression. As in the famously clear line attributed to Hergé: we know the extent to which its “ideality” comes only from work transcended, from the graphic drudgery of erasures, hesitations, and corrections. We also know that narrative as well as graphic clarity is the ideal product generated by a wrestling with the graphic-figurative material, but that the finished work tries to muffle that conflict in
favor of transparency in the expression-representation. In the case of graphic design, or of the image in general, transparency is obviously linked to what is represented, to the real or imagined referent. Transparency means that the material image is effaced in favor of what it evokes beyond itself. Which is to say that monstration, at least when it tends toward figuration, is transitive. Every analogical simulacrum needs such transitivity; that is, every image strives to make itself forgotten as a contingent means of representation.

Any means of expression, and especially any means of artistic expression, then, has to be framed in relation to the constraints of the chosen materials of expression. That is the sense in which expression is always a quasi-physical encounter, a "corps à corps." At the same time, a constraint is not a limit, because a constraint is also the source, and even the condition, of creativity. If one were to create – we can always dream – an "imaginatics," a transversal discipline which would study the genesis of creative works in so far as they emerge from the interactive encounter of a subjective imaginary opened up by a means of expression, then this discipline would have to take into account the role of this material opacity within the creative process.

If one looks at the example of literary creation, for example, theorists normally take into account the stimulation that comes from the writer’s encounter with language, with writing in its very materiality. The writerly encounter is linked to what one might call "fictional germination." Commenting on his own literary genetics, Claude Simon points out that: "What one writes . . . is the product not of a conflict between a vague initial project and language itself, but rather of a symbiosis between the two . . . which makes the result infinitely richer than the first intention." In literature, writing, in the specificity of its opacity, becomes itself a material for fiction, "the singular adventure of a narrator who never stops searching, touchingly discovering the world by groping in and through writing."

We might equally draw our example from musical creation. If one studies the genesis and evolution of the sonata form in Beethoven, one notices an intense interaction between musical form and mediating material, notably in relation to the new pianoforte. In that period, the composer discovered the timbre and potentials of this "avant-garde" instrument, which prefigured the emerging new symphonic orchestra. Thus, in several sonatas, for example Opus 27, Number 1, Beethoven develops a strong interactive confrontation with the percussive element and the specific resonating capacities of the pianoforte, as one can attest by examining Beethoven’s successive manuscripts and by the name "sonata quasi una fantasia" (as if one were improvising). As Beethoven himself revealed, musical scenarios conceived on paper are often profoundly modified through interaction with the sonority and dynamics of the instrument which opened up extraordinary new horizons.

The example of Beethoven is not meant to imply a form of cultural elitism implicitly linked to the image of the classical composer as musical demiurge. We can also draw our example from the realm of popular culture. The Jimi Hendrix Experience constitutes a complex cocktail: the creative intuitions of an improviser in interaction with a specific instrument, the guitar, in dialogue as well with the whole phenomenon of electrified, amplified, and saturated sound, as well as with the social-cultural-anthropological moment.
of mass pop concerts. To put it ironically, how can one convert Jimi Hendrix into an English flute? Or, better, how can one convert Jimi Hendrix into an English flute without performing a veritable adaptational re-creation? Here we encounter the fundamental and very Hegelian problematic of the interaction of human beings with their means of expression. Human beings invent expressive or technical means and devices which allow them to have a certain grasp and understanding of the world, but these means also resist human intervention and thereby offer, as part of the specific confrontation with this resistance, inexhaustible possibilities for creativity.

This physical encounter between idea and material, or in terms of the narrative arts the encounter between the story (fabula) and the medium, has important consequences because it assumes that any process of adaptation has to take into account the kinds of “incarnations” inherent in this encounter in terms of the materiality of media. Whence our desire to reframe this problematic within a new “transversal” discipline – narrative mediatics – which would deal with questions of intermediality, transécriture, and transmediatization, and whose goal would be to study the encounter of a narrative project – that is, a story not yet fixed within a definitive matter of expression – with “the power of inertia of a given medium.” Indeed, in order to be communicated, any real or imaginary narrative substratum is obliged to deploy a means of mediation allowing for finding the configuration within which the coherence of story making or mise-en-intrigue, this crucial act which Ricoeur calls “second mimesis,” can be constructed.

——— Fabula, Syuzhet, Media ———

But before proceeding in this direction, we have to disentangle a rather tangled skein, bringing to the surface a notional pair quietly present in this article since the very beginning, to wit the distinction between fabula and syuzhet, inherited, as everyone knows, from the Russian Formalists. The exercise, as we shall see, is very revealing. But first a warning. In what follows, we will be using not the translation but rather the transliteration of the words “fabula” and “syuzhet,” as is the custom in the Anglo-Saxon world, in order to better mark off their differential character than their French equivalents – “fable” and “sujet” – which are too polysemic and tarnished by ill usage. We must point out from the outset that for the Russian Formalists the “fabula” exists absolutely independently of any specific medium. It is, by definition, external to any actual work; it is not at all incarnated. Tomashevsky is very clear on this point:

We call [fabula] the ensemble of linked events which are communicated to us by a given work. The fabula can be exposed in a pragmatic manner by following the natural order, i.e. the chronological and causal order of events, independently of the manner in which they are placed and introduced in the work itself.
The question of the independence of the *fabula* for an adept of narratology can be clarified through Bremond’s famous formulation suggesting that a narrative is a “layer of autonomous signification, whose structure can be isolated from the message as a whole” and that the structure of the recounted story is independent of “the techniques which are used to express it.”\(^8\) It seems possible, and legitimate, at first glance, to extract from a narrative work a kernel of actions quite apart from the means of expression through which this kernel of actions is relayed. The pedagogic and canonical process of the synopsis, or narrative summary, is based on precisely such an idea. But what are the limits of such a procedure? How much of the original work remains in the summary and how much is lost? Although we cannot give a definitive answer to this question, we can clarify some elements of an answer.

At the same time, we cannot accept the overly categorical claim that a *fabula* cannot exist except as it is embodied in some medium or other. All we need to do, to realize the limitations of such a view, is to close our eyes and imagine the story of “Little Red Riding Hood.” The *fabula* of “Little Red Riding Hood” clearly exists, in each of our brains. More accurately, it exists as it is deformed and informed by each of our brains, or even more precisely by the powers and limitations of our brains which play the role, in this case, of media, or better of pseudo-media since their perception is not shared with other people, unless one turns to a “medium” in the other, more magical, sense of that word.\(^9\) To share our *fabulating* experience with another subject, we have to rely on a real medium such as language, mime, or design. Which implies as well the ways in which the media inform and deform any given *fabula*.

But when the Formalists argue that the *fabula* is independent of the media, it does not mean it is possible to refer to that *fabula* without thinking of a medium. To think, or express, the *fabula* in its very independence in relation to media, we still need to express or think the *fabula* in relation to some medium. In most cases, the medium will be verbal language as a kind of integrated medium closely linked to our own thought processes. A *fabula* like “Little Red Riding Hood,” moreover, is more easily separated from its mediatic actualization insofar as it has a mythic dimension as a kind of psychic landmark indicative of collective social identity, and even of the human race.

Beyond the *fabula*, there is also the *syuzhet*, which has always been difficult to define, insofar as the Formalists have always defined it as both distinct from the *fabula* and at the same time in some sense not so distant from it. One might even suggest that the *syuzhet* includes the *fabula* or at least includes diverse elements of the *fabula*, but only after having passed through the crucible of what one might call the *mise-en-syuzhet*, or a process of, to use a rather barbarous neologism, “syuztheticization.” A later passage in the Tomashhevsky text clarifies the point: “The [fabula] is opposed to the [syuzhet], which is constituted by the same events, but which respects their order of appearance in the work itself and the sequence of informations that designates them.”\(^10\)

One part of this statement – “the sequence of informations that designates” the events – is intriguing, and Tomashhevsky does not elaborate on it, except for one note: “In short, the [fabula] is what really happened, and the [syuzhet] is the manner in which the reader
learns about what happened.” If we take Tomashevsky seriously, then, the syuzhet is, in a way, the text as it is incarnated in a specific medium. We encounter the same idea in a text by Tynianov: “It [the syuzhet of the story] represents a kind of dynamics which takes form on the basis of all the material links . . . having to do with the style of [the fabula] and so forth.” And again, this time in relation to the cinema: “The script usually provides the ‘fabula’ in general’ together with a few elements linked to the ‘bouncing’ character of the cinema. How the fabula will be developed, what will be the syuzhet, is something the scriptwriter knows nothing about, any more than the director before the projection of the fragments.” Thus the syuzhet would be the equivalent of the fabula insofar as it is mediated. In other words, the same fabula, the same anecdotal substratum, could undergo various “syuzheticizations.” So “Little Red Riding Hood” could undergo a writerly syuzheticization, an oral syzheticization, a filmic syuzheticization and so forth, all of which would be quite distinct.

David Bordwell would disagree, since for him: “The structuration of the syuzhet is, in logical terms, independent of the media, since the same syuzhet structures could be materialized in a novel, a play, or a film.” One might think that Bordwell here commits the error denounced by Chklovski decades before: “Many people confuse the notion of [syuzhet] with the description of events, with what I propose we call the [fabula]. But in fact the [fabula] is nothing but a material in the service of [syuzhet].” But Bordwell, in fact, does clearly distinguish between fabula and syuzhet, which he defines as “the concrete disposition and representation of the fabula within the film.”

Bordwell’s error, in our view, lies in not taking into account the range of phenomena that the Formalists include within the wide net of their syuzhet. In fact, their notion of syuzhet is in a way too broad, since it includes both (1) what Bordwell sees in it, i.e. the specific structuration of the fabula within a specific work – and it is not clear that structuration in this sense has anything to do with the media in question – and (2) the diverse aspects of mediatic incarnation implied by structuration. As formulated by the Formalists, in other words, syuzhet comprises two very different phenomena, even though the Formalists are not entirely wrong to connect them. Yet within our project here it strikes us as useful to distinguish the two points and consider them as enjoying a relative autonomy.

It is true that the syuzhet represents the ensemble of the motifs of the fabula according to, as Tomashevsky puts it, “the succession of events in the work itself.” But for us the definition of the syuzhet cannot be limited to such factors since, as Tomashevsky also points out, it is not insignificant that: “The reader becomes aware of a specific event at a specific point in the work and that the event is communicated directly by the author himself, or by a character, or with the help of indirect allusions.” There can thus be no doubt about the textual nature of the syuzhet. Thus at one end of the spectrum we have the fabula, the story as pure virtuality, the abstract story prior to any mediatization. At the other end of the spectrum we have the medium, the expressive support, the semiotic vehicle, also abstract in its way, insofar as here it is being considered in its virtuality. Fabula and medium are completely independent in relation to each other, while
the *syuzhet* mediates a kind of rendezvous between the two, a product of the incarnation in media of a narrative substratum.

And this *syuzhet* has two faces or aspects. One turns toward the *fabula*, the other toward the medium. We will call one aspect the *syuzhet*-structure and the other the *syuzhet*-text, partly inspired by Thierry Groensteen’s enumeration concerning the various “levels of accomplishment” of a work of fiction (he uses the French word “*sujet,*” while we, following the Formalist usage, prefer *fabula*):

For my part, I would distinguish three levels of accomplishment in any work of fiction. A fiction is the result of an effort at invention, producing what in French is called a “*sujet*” (theme) [and in Russian the *fabula*]; of an effort of organization, producing a *structure*; and an effort of expression, productive of a *text* . . . We can therefore – and indeed this is what usually happens – be faithful to the “*sujet*” (the theme) while modifying the other two levels. The term “adaptation” emphasizes the modifications in the structure as a result of technical constraints (for example the operation of time in the various media). The word “transsemiotization,” meanwhile, emphasizes the replacement of one text by another, whose mediatic materiality is essentially different.17

Groensteen concludes with a very important question, to which we shall return, to wit:

“To what extent can structure and text be literally transposed?”

A fiction, then, is the product of three kinds of creative intervention: (1) an intervention in terms of invention, the famous *inventio* of classical rhetoric, which generates the diverse elements of the story being told; (2) an intervention having to do with organization, bearing on the structuration of the story, which can be identified with the *dispositio* of classical rhetoric; and, finally, (3) an intervention at the level of expression, through a medium, of the narrative elements already “invented” and “disposed.” This tripartite division in terms of the levels of accomplishment – theme, structure, and text for Groensteen; *fabula, syuzhet*-structure and *syuzhet*-text for us – allows us to pose in a much clearer way the question of the relation between narrative ideas and the constraints specific to the diverse media. When we move from one level to another, in the order that we have established, we discern a progressively greater implication of media in terms of the text being constructed. Which suggests to us that the *fabula* is already implicated by the media in question. Indeed, it matters little that the *fabula* is independent of specific media, since the *fabula* only exists as such insofar as it is on the side of “thought,” for as soon as we imagine the *fabula* being on the side of the constructed, we are in the realm of the media.

Anyone who doubts this idea need only try to adopt the *fabula* of “Little Red Riding Hood” in a “unipunctual” medium such as still photography. Specifically mediatic questions like ‘pluripunctuality’ “ quickly come to the surface.18 Every *fabula*, in fact possibly every event, in its configuration, even before its “medial incarnation,” already has certain features which are in a certain sense “medial.” Furthermore, the relationship between a given story or event and a given medium already carries a certain meaning, which at
least partially confirms our basic feeling that each fabula is intrinsically endowed with its own configuration which is always already compatible with the various media and thus preprograms, as it were, every process of adaptation.

As for the syuzhet, which would then occupy an intermediate terrain between fabula and medium, and which we prefer to regard in a theoretical sense as the place of securing of the told and the telling, in this sense the syuzhet is deeply implicated in the media. The syuzhet-structure already implies a minimum of medial consciousness, to the extent that, as Groensteen suggested in the text cited above, the technical constraints inherent in specific media impose a certain dimension or calibration on the structure of the syuzhet, in terms of the treatment of time, for example. Whence some of the specific challenges of adaptation. As for the syuzhet-text, it exists in symbiosis with the media in the sense that it can only be developed as it is poured into medial form, resulting in serious problems for adaptation.

---

**Médiagénie and Adaptation**

Up to this point, we have dealt with media in terms of fabula and even more of syuzhet. Now we have to move in the opposite direction, beginning from the media. Our goal is to show that if one wants to grasp the genesis and the status of a mediatized story, one cannot remain at the level of a simple logical consecution articulating the sequence of “inventio,” “dispositio,” and a mediatic-expressive structuration. For that reason, we will now further explore the idea of narrative mediatics introduced earlier.

We have already stressed the extent to which the encounter, or better the profound interaction, with the resistant opacity of the chosen matter of expression is itself generative, even decisive, within the process of creation. This general proposition needs to be further developed, especially in terms of the narrative arts insofar as they are fashioned within the crucible of the media which serve as a vehicle for them and even define them. Obviously, when one thinks of narratives, one spontaneously thinks of them in terms of their “natural” materialization in verbal language. But, even on this level, think for a moment of the very different character, and even the different meaning, of a story, or more precisely a syuzhet, when it is expressed orally as opposed to when it is expressed through the work of writing. And these differences proliferate even more when the syuzhet surfaces within such complex media as the cinema, television, and the comic strip.

Each medium, according to the ways in which it exploits, combines, and multiplies the “familiar” materials of expression – rhythm, movement, gesture, music, speech, image, writing (in anthropological terms our “first” media) – each medium, to recapitulate, possesses its own communicational energetics. Such is the nature of the power of inertia invoked earlier. The metaphor of inertia, borrowed from physics, perhaps brings with it overly negative connotations. One might prefer concepts such as “the force of gravity” or even “force of attraction.” Such appellations doubtless point more effectively to the...
expressive and narrative potential of a given medium when, as they say, one looks at it in the abstract. This observation recalls the distinction, proposed a few years ago, between intrinsic and extrinsic narrativity.¹⁹ Thus the film and the comic strip by their very nature have a certain narrative je ne sais quoi when they are defined in terms of the manner in which they activate and trigger a succession of images, as well as the manner in which they stimulate the possibility of introducing a principle of transformation within that succession. It is the responsibility of this intrinsic narrative potential to receive an extrinsic narrative content.

To receive or, better, to interact with the aforementioned content. To draw once again on the archive of metaphors drawn from the sciences, but this time from chemistry, the media “react” with the fabula that chooses that medium. Or to put it in a way more in keeping with what we have argued up to this point, the media can only take on the responsibility of communicating a fabula by developing a syuzhet-reaction whose scope, obviously, can vary a good deal. As a narrative project, the fabula is incarnated through interaction with a medium. This interaction is manifested first of all in and through the syuzhet-text, but also in and through the syuzhet-structure to which it is intimately linked. Narrative transparency therefore always brushes up against the opacity of a reaction-syuzhet secreted by the medium. The goal of the classical fictional story is, of course, to win over the public by trying to hide its status as artifact, but the media and the means of expression mobilized by such stories resist the attempt. This resistance, this opacity – we can recall again the example of Beethoven – can be the sources of creation, offering the fabula fabulous opportunities for syuzheticization.

Narrative mediatics requires more work on these issues in order to clarify the possible limitations and developments, while also defining more precisely the idea of media. It seems to us that this discipline should apply first of all to the mass media, that is, to complex media which gather together various basic materials of expression.

Alongside the extrinsic and intrinsic features already mentioned, we might also distinguish two broad conceptual categories: mediativity²⁰ (or perhaps mediality) and narrativity. The first would bear on the expressive power (much as one speaks of the power of an engine) developed by the media. This ontological potential is medium-specific and depends on the intrinsic features of the means of expression or representation that the medium requires or combines. Comic strips, for example, generally combine a designed image with a written text, both of which are poured into a homogeneous graphic dynamic. More generally, the potential of a medium derives from a double interaction: not only the interaction that allows a coded opening of an internal space where different materials of expression can be combined, but also the interaction that is produced by the encounter, or the (chemical) reaction of these first means of expression with the technical apparatuses designed to relay and amplify them. How many possibilities, for example, in the encounter of a single voice with the sonorous modulations made possible by the microphone! Mediativity would refer then to a medium’s intrinsic capacity to represent – and to communicate that representation. That capacity is determined by the technical possibilities of the medium, by the internal semiotic configurations that it calls up, and by
the communicational and relational apparatuses that it is able to put in place. A cinematic example: in its manner of representing the pro-filmic (that which the camera records), the filmographic, in its specificity, has everything to do with mediativity. The same is true of "graphiation," the basic instance of enunciation of the comic strip. And the same point applies for the mediatization-narration of events by direct transmission as one of the specific features of television.

As a necessarily more narrow category, narrativity refers to the character or the quality of that which is narrative. But this definition becomes inadequate in the context of narrative mediatics. It might be preferable to give narrativity a pragmatic, virtual meaning. One can observe the narrative character of a given object (for example, of a fiction film), but one can also discern the narrative "seed" or potential within a given object (for example, the photograph which suggests a possible story without actually being that story). We therefore have to distinguish between an explicitly affirmed narrative and a virtual narrative as a possible dimension inherent in a given configuration of an object (whether a sign, a message, or, more basically, a medium). In a sense, narrativity is included within the larger category of mediativity; it is in this sense a particular modality of mediativity.

Intrinsic narrativity, then, has to do with the ontological narrative potential of media which it possesses as a function of its own mediativity (for example, the contiguity and consecution of the images of a comic strip). Supposing that the media generate their own illusion, intrinsic narrativity shapes and conditions the syuzhet.

Extrinsic narrativity, meanwhile, has to do with the narrative disposition, stronger or weaker as the case may be, manifested in the anecdotal substratum on which the fabula is based. Thus, some real-life events, such as a horrific crime, the suicide of a star, or the Tour de France with its progressive stages, seem to slide more easily than other events into a story; such events seem to spontaneously ask to be rendered as stories. Such would be the object of study of narrative diegetics: to study what in reported events, whether real or imaginary, lends itself to narrative. Or, to put it differently, to study the question of a narrative virtuality of events which precedes even the formation of the narrative. If we push this thinking even farther, is it not this intuited narrative virtuality that enables us to "construct" an event? Diegetics could thus conceive of a downstream and an upstream approach to the media, since some fabulas seem less susceptible to the force of attraction of the media, and some are more easily detached from their mediatic syuzhet (think, for example, of the propensity for emancipation, even autonomy, of the little story in Lumière’s L’Arroseur arrosé [The Waterer Watered]).

But here we touch on one of the most important consequences of narrative mediatics, having to do with questions of intermediality, transécriture, and adaptation. Each narrative project, in our view, can be considered in terms of médiagénie. Fables and stories have the possibility of being brought to life in the best possible way by choosing the most appropriate mediatic partner. Perhaps this explains why some works seem “unadaptable.” Being literally poured into the form a specific medium, these stories suffer enormous losses in the transition from one medium to another. The burlesque episodes lived on the screen
by a Buster Keaton or a Harold Lloyd only realize their full expressive potential in and through the silent film. One might make the same point about the intimate confidences of Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the various adaptations of which have generally been seen as scandalous. We find the same situation with the *Adventures of Tintin*, whose *fabula* is of a body, almost literally, with its *syuzhet*, and its *syuzhet* with the medium, and whose adaptation in the form of an animated cartoon is criticized, somewhat paradoxically, for freezing its characters in place. Here we have a strange paradox, indeed, since the model, despite the intrinsic stasis of its fixed images, seems less static than its adaptation into moving images. *L’intermédialité*, it seems, has its reasons, that reason itself does not know.

It is true that, basically, the reader who immerses him or herself in the story of a comic strip will always be disappointed when the story is transposed into film. The disappointment is perhaps exacerbated by the kind of false proximity of the relationship between these two means of telling stories through images. But the processes of fictionalization, the phenomenology of reading, and the modes of participation in the two media are quite different. With its way of displaying images across the space of a page, with its obvious deficiencies in terms of realistic illusion, the comic strip actively calls on the reader’s participation. Readers have to draw on their own imagination to mentally represent what has not been given in perceptual terms (sound, movement, temporality). Once we have supplanted this lack, filled in the void, the comic strip world communicates the idea that our imaginary is indirectly responsible for the experience. Tintin, Haddock, and Castafiore all have a grain of voice which is the one that we have mentally ascribed to them. The Dupondt have their attitude, their own gawkiness. When the same characters, in a film, become endowed with real voices and movement, the fans of these comics are almost necessarily disappointed. The incarnated voice of Captain Haddock will never be “realistic” or authentic for the person who knows the character through prior experience of the comic strip. To grasp this phenomenon even better, we can think of the experience of radio, which in some ways constitutes the opposite situation. When we know a voice through radio, when the medium has made it familiar, we are almost always surprised and often disappointed when we encounter the same voice accompanied by the body to which it belongs. Here we touch on the question of what one might call the localization of the foyer or place of the impression of reality, a localization which can be more or less internal or external to the medium, depending on the fictional configurations generated by the medium.

It might be useful, in this sense, to imagine a class of texts which consists of those works (plays, films, novels, comic strips, and so on) which are more or less unadaptable without major upheavals or without “breaking up” entirely. This hypothetical repertory would include those works that use the media to express the last entrenchments of the medium. In the comic strip, such would be the case of the stories of Marc-Antoine Mathieu whose plots integrate and dramatize the internal workings of the “ninth art” along with the process of reading that the work demands. In this sense, certain forms of *mise-en-abyme* would be a way of rendering both the *syuzhet* and the medium irreplaceable.
number of works nourish themselves by accepting this mediatic opacity as a kind of necessary rustle. Others reveal their genius by the exemplary manner in which they inextricably mingle their narrative with the spectacular emancipation, and therefore the opacity, of the medium in question.

How does one find the forms of fidelity to the spirit of a medium? That kind of fidelity is probably more productive than the famous notion of fidelity to an author, or to a story. Every self-respecting adaptation needs to organize the violence done to the *fabula* and to the *syuzhet* of the source work, for in a way the new *syuzhetization* involves not only a *mise-en-sujet*, that is, the shaping of a story, but also and especially a *mise-en-sujiétion*, and its “subjectedness” to a specific medium.

The weight of a story, like that of a body, is only imaginable in relation to a mediatic force of attraction. The more intense the *médiagénie*, the more awkward the attempts to free oneself from this force of attraction. In order to move in the direction of another medium, the “being” of the story, insofar as it exists, has to dress up in a space suit, as it were, which can allow it to confront a temporary but dangerous state of weightlessness. If the translation succeeds, the story will accept a greater weight, or a loss of weight. And even, at times, accept profound modifications in mass and aspect. All of which opens up, as on the moon, hitherto unsuspected developments and perspectives.

Translated by Robert Stam

---

**Notes**

2. For more on this subject, see Phillipe Marion, *Cours de communication narrative* (Louvain-la-Neuve: DUC, 1992).
9. Our brain might itself be conceived of as a medium if we remember that it allows different parts of the body to communicate with one another and exchange information.
12 Ibid., 69.
16 Ibid.
17 Thierry Groensteen, in a text appended to a letter to André Gaudreault, dated February 25, 1991.
19 Ibid., p. 43.
20 For more on this concept, see Philippe Marion, “Narratologie médiatique et médiagénie des récits,” *Recherches en Communication* 7 (1997), 61–87.
21 Gaudreault, *Du littéraire au filmique*, passim.
23 For the first formulations of this concept, see Marion, *Traces en cases*, and “Petite médiatique de la peur,” *Protée* 21: 2 (1993), 47–56.